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AUTHOR	Webber, Kikanza Nuri
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INSTITUTION	California State Univ., Los Angeles.
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ABSTRACT

Those who teach language arts to black children have many opportunities and face many challenges as they work to help Afro-American children learn standard English. Among the opportunities are: (1) to help black students retain the ways of using language that are unique to their culture, while at the same time helping them to acquire the language of instruction and political power, standard English; (2) to take on a more political role in order to gain support for Standard English as a Second Dialect programs; (3) to develop training programs to help instructors understand Afro-American language from both linguistic and cultural perspectives, and to learn techniques for supplementing this native dialect with standard English skills; (4) to refine strategies and techniques for teaching oral language and composition skills; and (5) to improve attitudes towards linguistic differences. Major challenges include: (1) avoiding the temptation to support the institutionalization of Black English without teaching black students how to use standard English; (2) providing substantive training for teachers, which includes knowledge of language acquisition, oral language drills, and knowing how to identify and remedy miscues in writing and reading caused by the interference of Black English; and (3) applying the vast and growing body of research on Black English to the teaching of language. (KH)

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THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN THE QUEST FOR EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

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Kikanza Nuri Webber

Teachers of language arts are confronted daily with opportunities and challenges as they work to help students develop their oral and written communication skills. Teachers of Afro-American students have a greater number of opportunities because 70% of Black Americans to some degree, use a non-standard variety of English. Many Afro-American children, consequently, are learning Standard English as a second dialect. Students must become aware of the differences between their Afro-American dialect and standard American English. They must learn to distinguish between those differences and then become skilled in using them appropriately. Teachers of language arts must help them do this. Over the past few years, the nation has been inundated with reports which have challenged educators to renew their commitment to academic excellence. This paper presents five opportunities and three challenges for language arts teachers as they pursue their quest for educational excellence.

Opportunties

Teachers have many opportunities to improve the quality of language arts instruction provided for Black children through individual professional development and in cooperation with other educators.

Opportunity One: To Stop Calling Names

The language of Afro-America has been described in many different ways. It has been called poor and incorrect grammar. It has been labeled Black English, Ebonics, non-standard English and Black dialect. It has been identified as a dialect of American English and it has been vehemently touted as a complete language system. The debate over what to call the language patterns of Afro-Americans has often skewed and overshadowed efforts to develop programs for teaching standard English. Many districts have gotten so involved in debating whether the speech

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of Afro-Americans is a language or a dialect, that they have delayed implementing any language programs for their Black pupils.

Language is the single aspect of culture that most completely conveys the essence of the people who use it natively. The language of Black America reflects the socio-historical experience of Afro-Americans. It is therefore important to retain it among those Afro-Americans who use it. Standard American English, however, is the language of instruction in America. It is the language of power in this country, and educators have an obligation to focus their energy on teaching standard English language arts skills instead of on what they call the language patterns of their Afro-American students.

Opportunity Two: To Start Playing Politics

Many educators feel that schools are apolitical environments; that unspecified ethical standards mandate teachers not acknowledge that what they teach and how they teach it are often politically volatile issues, which are commonly resolved outside of the classroom by politicians. Public schools exist at the mandate of very political bodies -- state legislatures. Moreover, even though the provision of schooling is a state responsibility, federal government wields a great deal of power over the nature of school programs and policies. The political milieu of the local districts determines how these policies are implemented. Teachers of language arts must understand how these laws and policies affect the texts they use and the programs they implement. They must keep current on issues so that through local teacher associations they can levy pressure to make necessary changes to improve language arts programs.

Some language arts educators are already playing politics. Much money is spent to provide English as a Second Language or bilingual training for non-English speaking students. The reason some educators argue so strongly that the speech patterns of Afro-Americans is a language, not a dialect, is that it is much easier to obtain language program funds for a second language, than it is for a second dialect which many people, including some who use it, perceive to be substandard grammar.

ESL, bilingual, pull-out and immersion describe the various programs for children whose native language is not English. However, despite the research which clearly indicates a need for parallel programs for America's Black youngsters, the few which exist are still in a developmental stage and money to fund them has been limited. Clearly, teachers of language arts have the opportunity to start playing politics in order to gain support for Standard English as a Second Dialect programs.

Opportunity Three: To Develop Training Programs

If the emphasis is taken away from what to call this language pattern and placed upon lobbying for funds to provide standard English training specifically to meet the needs of these youngsters, then language arts teachers will be prepared to respond to this third opportunity. There is a great need for the development of training programs, both pre-service and in-service to help teachers to understand Afro-American language from both linguistic and cultural perspectives, and to learn techniques for supplementing this native dialect with standard English skills. This type of training should be ongoing as opposed to the one-shot approach many school leaders take toward staff development.

All teachers must become aware of the importance of teaching standard English in all ways, not just in English classes or during the language arts lessons. Consequently it is necessary for teachers to be provided with the support through training in Standard English as a Second Dialect (SESD) techniques so that Afro-American children receive the type of language development training they need.

Although Lorenzo Turner published the first linguistic description of Black English in 1941, that body of information, which has grown

tremendously in the last twenty years, is still unknown or new to most educators. Consequently, those educators who have some knowledge of what Black English is and what approaches work most effectively with its speakers, have an obligation to share what they know with other educators. Unfortunately, not enough educators share and the students suffer because of in-house competition and the jealous guarding of expertise-turf. District resource teachers have been known to work harder to keep a program, conceived by a rival, out of their schools, than to support the implementation of a program which would develop the language arts skills of Afro-American pupils.

Emphasis must be placed on teaching reading and writing across the curriculum, and providing teachers with the tools to do that. Just as students must first become aware of the differences between standard English and Black English before they can learn to distinguish between those differences and use them appropriately, teachers must also be made aware. This can be done best through teacher education programs in teacher training institutions and through on-going inservice staff development.

Opportunity Four: To Refine Strategies and Techniques

After initial training programs have been developed, the information must be disseminated. Most training available today provides initial awareness for teachers. We must now refine the strategies and techniques presented in these training programs and give teachers additional strategies and techniques for teaching oral language and composition skills. Teachers must be taught to help students to move from their awareness of language differences to distinguishing among the forms for the appropriate one. Teachers must be taught the drills most effective for reinforcing these concepts. As more language arts materials are developed, teachers will have a wider variety of techniques and strategies to select from. Included in the teacher training programs should be socio-linguistic concepts which emphasize the legitimacy of a learner's native dialect and the importance of not devaluing the home language of the student. Teachers must be provided with the tools to supplement, not supplant the native language of their students.

Opportunity Five: To Work on Our Attitudes

One reason language programs for Afro-American students are still in a neonatal stage of development is that people are still uncomfortable acknowledging the cultural and linguistic differences of Afro-American children. Many Afro-American parents oppose programs which single out their children because of cultural or linguistic differences. More specifically, some Afro-Americans deny the existence of a linguistically credible pattern of speech unique to Black Americans. Yet, just as the denial and concomitant opposition to SESD programs by some members of the Black community is strong, so is the well-intentioned, but ill-placed support of white educators. They sometimes accept inappropriate language or language forms that would be errors in any dialect in attempts to demonstrate their tolerance for language differences. Their attitude is that anything different must be alright. The problem is the absence of training that would help them distinguish between grammatical errors, and linguistically appropriate expressions in another dialect. It is manifested in a reluctance to criticize or correct anything, because what looks or sounds incorrect may be a dialect difference.

Since the majority of Afro-American children live in America's urban centers, the issue of language programs for them is not one of Black and White. Members of other ethnic and linguistic groups are also affected. Hispanics or Asians may perceive that Afro-Americans are competing for language program funds which rightfully belong to them. They may consequently seek to compete with, rather than provide support for SESD programs. Appropriate attitudes among the parents and teachers of Afro-American children will cause them to cultivate alliances with members of other linguistic groups. Together, they can advocate

for the implementation of language arts programs that teach Standard English skills to all children.

Challenges

Opportunities and challenges are euphemisms for problems and their solutions. The five opportunities for teachers of language arts are related to the training of teachers, the dissemination of materials, and the development of attitudes supportive of SESD programs. Three challenges are offered, which if met, will clear the path for taking advantage of the opportunities presented here.

Challenge One: To Stay Off the Bandwagon

The basic issue is language use and literacy. Afro-American children must be able to use standard American English correctly and appropriately, without sacrificing fluency in their native dialect. Multicultural education, mainstreaming, mentally gifted minors are examples of hot educational topics which have had major bandwagon support. If it is popular or politically expedient, educators are for it and politicians will fund it, whether or not the program is appropriate or academically sound. Educators need to stay off the Black English Bandwagon which makes lots of noise, generates lots of initial interest, but provides no substantive training for teachers or programming for students.

Challenge Two: To Properly Train Teachers

Substantive training for teachers includes information on language acquisition, so that teachers understand the process by which students acquire their native dialect and through which they will most effectively learn the second dialect of Standard English. Teachers must be trained to use effective oral language drills, so they can provide students the necessary practice for learning standard English grammar. Some teachers provide what they call oral language practice, but in reality it is practice in oration, rather than in the language forms appropriate for the classroom or the job market.

Teachers must be taught to identify miscues in writing and reading which are caused by the interference of Black English. More important, they must be taught how to remedy these problems, particularly in a classroom where the student population is not entirely Afro-American. This type of training must be provided in college courses, not at conference workshops. It should be a part of the training all elementary teachers receive and it should be included in the training of secondary language arts teachers.

Challenge Three: To Apply Research

The body of literature on Black English spans over fifty years. Most of it is descriptive. Lorenzo Turner (1949) published the first scholarly studies which described the speech of Black Americans. His works were not examined widely until the 1960s when the first modern wave of descriptive research was published. That was when White linguists, e.g. Labov (1965), Stewart (1968), and Dillard (1972), studied and recorded the speech patterns of urban Afro-American children, and linguistically described its structure. The second wave of research was conducted by native speakers of the language of Afro-America. The contributions of Johnson (1969), Smitherman (1977), Taylor (1971) and others were socio-linguistic descriptions of the language forms and functions within the culture. They countered the recommendations of White linguists to provide texts written in Black English, with suggestions for teaching and standard English as a second dialect and for acknowledging the bi-dialectalism and bi-culturalism of Afro-American students. The third wave of literature on Black English is developing now. It is not descriptive, but rather the production of texts, workbooks, and training materials. Teachers of language arts must be involved in the process of applying the vast body of research on the language of Afro-Americans, language acquisition and language curricula to the development of student materials and the training of teachers to use them.

These challenges indicate to the language arts teacher that she or he cannot seek excellence --there is no quest for educational excellence--

rather, they must be excellent. There must be an excellent understanding of issues related to the language of Afro-Americans. There must be excellent language programs to administer, and there must be excellent people to implement those programs. The role of language arts teachers in the quest for educational excellence includes the development and implementation of language arts programs that meet the needs of students from all American linguistic and cultural groups, including Afro-Americans. =

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